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John H. Johnson: A Historical Study on the Re-Education of African Americans in Adult Education Through the Selfethnic Liberatory Nature of Magazines

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Keywords: Adult Learning; Selfethnic Liberatory Education; Selfethnic Reflectors; Media; Nguzo Saba; Critical Race Theory; Africentrism

Abstract: This qualitative study explored the selfethnic liberatory educative nature and goals of John H. Johnson's work between 1942 and 2005 as a pioneering publisher and adult educator. The research documented the influence his magazines, EBONY and Jet, had as approaches of informal learning to combat the impact of sociocultural, psychological and intellectual racism on African Americans.

Statement of the Problem

Information about Johnson and the African-American media are lacking in the historical literature of the field. Adult education historians have not documented an accurate account to reflect African American contributions. This exclusion is "miseducative." History must not be theirs, where information is one sided, viewed from only one perspective, and merely told from a dominant perspective that is Eurocentric. History must be inclusive, accurate and complete to be effective. Exclusion of African American contributions in adult education serve to support the "mis-education of the Negro" (Woodson 1933) by reinforcing the notion that African Americans have not contributed in any way to adult education.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frame is African centered and reflective of two intellectual paradigms: Africentrism (Colin) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic). Colin's Theory of Selfethnic Reflectors is embedded in Africentrism, which includes the African centered principles of the Nguzo Saba. Aligning with this includes Colin's concept about liberatory adult education, which is a philosophy about education, along with Asante's concept regarding African agency. Marginalization is a concept embedded within CRT.

Research Design

This is a qualitative research study in that its concentration relies upon understanding the natural world by focusing on context and respecting the humanity of the person in the study. This type of research is grounded in the belief that knowledge and worldview are socially constructed. The way data is collected and interpreted are impacted by the subjectivity that a researcher brings which is reflected in questions asked and ways in which data is collected. Unlike quantitative research, which looks at causal relationships or correlations, this type of research allows the researcher to be at the center of the study, participate in the study and interpret data from a viewpoint that is subjective. The methodology for this study is an Africentric historical inquiry. It observes how Johnson used his pioneering publications, Negro Digest, EBONY and JET, within the context of the history and philosophy of adult education. Historical inquiry seeks to find answers by examining the past to obtain a better understanding of it and its existence. It

examines the past through events or people. It takes a look at the context in which certain events took place and/or how certain people made a contribution. Merriam and Simpson define historical inquiry as being “motivated by curiosity: it begins with wondering about some event, institution, idea, or person.” (Merriam & Simpson 2000, p. 75) A “system” is used with historical inquiry “for answering questions about the past or about underlying assumptions and beliefs.” (Merriam & Simpson 2000, p. 75) This study is historical in that it seeks to find answers through Johnson’s lens to obtain a better understanding of how African Americans were viewed by mainstream media. The following research questions guide this study: (1) How did Johnson contribute to adult education through his magazines? (2) How and in what ways did Johnson accomplish his mission of educating African Americans? (3) What are the issues and controversies surrounding publications written specifically for African Americans? And (4) How were his magazines powerful teaching tools and constant reminders of the importance of selfethnic reflectors?

Findings

Major findings derived from the data were: 1) Johnson contributed to adult education through his magazines by documenting the intellectual accomplishments and contributions of African Americans to the history in the United States. His magazines also documented the intellectual accomplishments and contributions of those in the African Diaspora. 2) Johnson documented history accurately and completely by re-educating African Americans and those in the African Diaspora so that they knew and understood that we are more than consumers but also producers who contributed to the intellectual and sociohistorical development of this country. 3) Sociocultural and intellectual achievements by African Americans weren’t documented and largely excluded in history. 4) Johnson’s magazine’s were powerful teaching tools and constant reminders for African Americans to know that they mattered and to know that their history was valuable though traditional education mis-educated them into believing that European values and views were intellectually superior to their own.

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